

CHAPTER 4

Identity and Perception

In this chapter, we will work together to:

- Explore how identity and perception are central to communication study
- Analyze the role of power and culture in the formation of identity
- Apply a variety of communication theories to the study of identity and perception
- Apply theories of identity and perception to speaking contexts, specifically to audience analysis

Harper had never had this kind of opportunity before. With just one summer to go before completing her MBA, she was excited to begin the job search and see what kind of opportunities would unfold.

Her father, right after her undergraduate graduation, told her how proud he was of her: “You know what, Harper? You represent the family—your success is our success, your success fulfills our family’s dream. You are the great-great-granddaughter of slaves who could not have dreamed that that you would have these chances, these possibilities. These past 140 years, our family has struggled with the legacy of enslavement and poverty to arrive at this moment where you crossed that stage and received your diploma. You are a new day in the history of this family.” Her father was always poetic. She imagined what his response to her graduate degree would be.

Harper smiled, remembering her father, known for his faith and his quick-witted insights. His dinner prayers and holiday toasts were legend, his gentle wisdom sought by so many. Harper was proud that he was her father, proud of this man who used the same hands to repair musical instruments during long hours in his workroom as he did to wipe away her tears when she cried after falling off her bike so many years ago. Harper saw how he worked to get her to college, the first in her family. When she got into graduate school, he worked double shifts to help pay the bills and keep her in a safe and respectable apartment: “You have to be safe if you are going to be the future of our family.” Friends would ask how she could handle the pressure her father put on her. Funny, she never felt pressure, just support and love from him, and from generations of family who lived and breathed through her as she studied. At graduation, she walked with them across the stage; this she believed from her father’s words.



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Any identity is more than a collection of traits, more than skin or body parts; rather, identity is always a historical idea, a product of social norms and patterns of thinking that, solidified over time, have become normalized, taken for granted.

Harper's first job would be the next step in a long journey inspired, in large part, by her father's quiet but insistent voice. She was excited to see the responses that would come back from the many résumés she would send all over the southeastern U.S.; she was eager for the challenge, but hopeful to stay close to home. What news would she get? Where would it come from? What sort of role would she take on in the business world? How could she make her hard work worth it? After always fighting the fight, as a Black woman in a predominately White school, it would feel so good to have a reward. She awaited the next phase of her life with excitement and anticipation.

Most of the time, most of us use words like *identity* and *perception* in pretty simple ways. For instance, when you watch a crime show on television, you might hear the detective say s/he is looking to discover the identity of the “perp,” the one who committed the crime. That detective uses his/her perception of the evidence (his/her hunches and other insights about people's motives and actions) to create a possible scenario that, by the show's end, resolves with the conviction of the criminal. In this kind of example, *identity* refers to who someone is, in the sense that your identification (your driver's license, your Social Security card, your student ID, etc.) refers to you. *Perception*, on the other hand, is someone's perspective or point of view. This is a helpful starting point for exploring how identity and perception are, because they emerge from communication, more complex.

For example, consider these factors about Harper:

- Harper describes herself as a “Black woman” and as such, her point of view or perception is likely to be influenced by her race and gender. In industries and occupations that are dominated by men in general or by White men in particular, Harper's perspective is likely to be different from a majority of her coworkers.'

- Harper is very close to her father and their relationship affects her decisions about her prospective employment.
- Harper is from the southeastern United States and hopes to stay there. This suggests that her perception and identity are affected by her Southern roots as well as her family's values.
- Harper sees who she is as a result of her ancestors' trials and struggles; influencing her sense of herself is what she knows of the lives of those who preceded her in her family.
- Harper will now have an advanced degree. Only a modest percentage of people in the world attain this level of education; an even smaller percentage of people with graduate education are African American women. Harper's perception is influenced by her identity as an educated person.
- Her father was a tradesperson, an individual who worked with his hands. As such, Harper is marked by her class background. As the first to attain a graduate education, Harper may be marked by a change in class status or a tension between these two class backgrounds.
- Finally, Harper entered her college programs as a domestic student; in this way, she was privileged to take classes in her first language and attend university in her home country.

Each of these factors makes everyday definitions of identity and perception seem thin. The question of who you are, or what your identity is, is not always easy to answer. For example, who Harper is has racial, gendered, historical, geographical, familial, classed, and education-oriented aspects to it (and, though we don't raise these in this particular example, she is also marked by her faith, her age, her ability, her sexuality, and her political orientation). For Harper, as for many of us, identity is also dependent on our context, on where we are in a given moment: Harper may be different at home than she is in her classroom or she may be different in her first job than she was in her graduate program. Harper's perception is also affected by her identity—who we are affects how we see any given situation.

DISCUSSION

How would you analyze your own identity? How does your identity shape your perception (for example, of particular issues in the news)?

In this book, we argue that identity is a compilation of your experiences as influenced by the social, political, and cultural factors that frame and mark those experiences. In other words, **identity** is, or the self is, the answer to the question “who am I?” with the added recognition that the “who” is always a little bit in flux, emerging from the cultures to which we belong. For example, let's say that Harper is from a working-class family who always had to scrape by to make ends meet. As such, Harper's understanding of money will always be framed in some way by this issue: Money is never certain, and we need to work hard to earn it. But maybe her best friend comes from a solidly middle-class family where money was not so scarce. Harper's friend would have had a different set of circumstances, becoming, in many ways, a different person, one who may not worry about whether she'll have enough money in the same ways Harper does. In any event, who we are is a function of the experiences we've had as raced, classed, gendered, sexualized, (dis)abled, and otherwise culturally marked and mediated individuals. Further, even if two of us are from the same ethnic background or sexual orientation, there are other experiences in our lives that shape us in distinct ways, that help us to have distinct perspectives on the world

(so we couldn't, for instance, expect two people of Native American ancestry to share the same worldview any more than we could expect it of two White people or two straight people).

Analyzing Harper's story is also significant for our understanding of perception: For instance, how someone perceives money as a result of her/his different experiences shapes how s/he views the world. **Perception**, then, is how one sees the world, as influenced by the social, political, and cultural experiences that frame and mark her/him. In order to understand Harper's perception of money—its value and worth—we need to consider it in the context of her childhood. Certainly, if Harper gets a new job that pays more than her family is used to, it might change her perception; however, part of the way Harper thinks about money (even if it is to spend more as she earns more) will always be affected in some way by this formative, childhood set of experiences.

Who is Harper? Is it enough to say Harper is a woman? A Black woman? A Black woman who was influenced by her father and her father's beliefs? This example teaches us that the answer of who we are is far more complicated than we can see here. The brief amount of information we have on Harper is not enough for us to know her fully. Moreover, Harper herself may not even be fully aware of how past experiences affect her actions, her perceptions, and her everyday communication. If we were always aware and able to carefully ponder these experiences, we might never need counselors or therapists; if we were always able to see clearly how past factors influence us, perhaps we'd be in more control of our communication. Our identities and our perceptions are inextricably intertwined with our communication. For example, Harper's experiences with money (what she heard her father say about it, what she witnessed at the store, conversations she overheard or took part in as a child, images she saw on television, and so on) are all communication events. Identity and perception are important to communication primarily because they are formed through the communication a person experiences in her/his past. (You might say we are how we've been communicated with throughout the course of our lives.) However, that person's communication (that is, what s/he says, does, and enacts) will also be influenced by her/his identity and perception. Harper's use of money today is going to be greatly affected by her identity, not to mention how that identity creates a certain kind of perception of, in this case, money. This relationship between identity/perception and communication is called a co-constitutive relationship in that both produce each other. A visual of these relationships might look like this: identity \leftrightarrow communication or perception \leftrightarrow communication. Simply put, they both make each other possible, and because this is so, we need to see them together.

In what follows, we track Harper's job offer through three communicative paradigms, exploring how each helps us understand why Harper is so conflicted over this potential opportunity. First, we examine social construction, considering how Harper has become the person she has become. Second, we offer theories of social location, specifically shifting from how we produce identity to how that production affects both our perception and how others perceive us. Finally, we look at performance as part of identity, which will build from the first two perspectives, showing how communication is a key part of how we become who we become. Together, these ways of understanding identity help us make sense of the complicated nature of Harper's decision.

Who Is Harper? Three Communication Paradigms

Harper sent out her applications on a balmy Tuesday afternoon in May, just a week after she had been cleared to graduate the following August. A set of spring showers had left her Southern town humid; however, as a native of the area, Harper wasn't really bothered by the weather as she walked home from the post office. In fact, if anyone had asked, she felt she could say for certain

that the sweat gathered on her brow was less a result of the weather outside and more about the climate of her mind. She was troubled by the decision she had made earlier that morning. In a final review of her résumé, she had decided to include a minority scholarship award she received during her final year of her undergraduate education. While the monetary amount was small, she was proud of the award because it was named after a man her father marched with during the civil rights era. Her father had been very young at the time, just a teenager, but he spoke of this man with such passion that, when the award was given to her, she felt like she had won it for her father. At the ceremony, her father had cried. It was one of only two times Harper had ever seen him cry; the other was at her grandmother's funeral.

Harper's concern centered on whether to include the award on her résumé, which, as a result, would clearly mark her race in her application. Given that "African American" was in the title of the award, there would be little doubt as to her racial background. Harper, like her father, was proud of her heritage, but given the backlash against Affirmative Action, she was worried she would get or lose a job primarily because of her race. She knew from her coursework that many companies in the United States face criticism of their diversity efforts from media, government, or special interest groups. While Harper understood that representation was important generally, she did not want to join an organization just because she was Black. In fact, she worried that such a role in an organization would just lead to others' disliking her or questioning her abilities, ensuring that she would have to work twice as hard to overcome people's perceptions of her and her qualifications. Racism, Harper knew, meant that she faced an uphill battle for legitimacy regardless of how she got the job—she didn't need to get the position because of her race and add that obstacle as well. She knew, as she walked home, that she would not easily shake the question from her mind.

It was two weeks after she mailed the résumés that she received her first phone call. It was from a solidly established company about two hours from her parents' house. The call was to arrange a phone interview with some of the key players in the division Harper would potentially join. What surprised Harper most was their rush to interview her; Harper would not graduate for a few months still, and she was worried about the timing. What if they wanted her before she could take the position? Further, Harper worried, again, that the organization was just interested in her because she was Black. An Internet search about the company did not help her; while the organization followed equal opportunity/affirmative action laws and featured a basic statement on a commitment to diversity, the organization did not appear to have much representation of Black folks. Moreover, when looking at company photos online, Harper found Black people in only two divisions; she found only one person of color in the entire website who worked in management.

Over the phone, she was surprised by the interest of the three interviewers. If hired, Harper would enter the sales supervision team on the ground level but would supervise a group of 10 to 12 traveling sales associates. The job seemed like a good fit, but she was still concerned. Nobody asked any questions about her race, though it seemed like it was a constant undertone of the interview: "This is a great city to live in—very diverse and welcoming of all kinds of people," said her would-be manager. Could be nothing, thought Harper, but there was an insistence on this point several times. "We'd like you to come in for a face-to-face interview." Harper was excited but would tread carefully as she did not know what to expect.

During her face-to-face meeting, she finally asked the question that was bothering her: "What was it about my application that caught your eye?" At first, the managers paused. Then, one offered: "Clearly, you meet the qualifications, are an excellent student about to receive your MBA at a good school, and your supplemental materials are very well constructed. Plus, you had a nice, comprehensive résumé that suggested an well-rounded background." As she got in her car to drive home, Harper felt let down. She felt like she was in a no-win situation: How would she know why they were interested in her? How could she shake this stupid, nagging feeling?

Identity and Perception as Social Construction

Anybody might ask “Who is Harper?,” mistakenly assuming that Harper is one person, always, and in all circumstances. It’s important to reflect on and reconsider that belief. Consider the “who” you are when you’re in your communication class versus the “who”s you are when you’re home in your dorm, in your parents’ home, with your partner and/or your children, or in your fraternity/sorority. These people might appear very different—one Friday night, you may be an avid poker player or someone who enjoys going clubbing, while you might be, in class, very quiet and studious. These different selves are perfectly normal; in fact, the only thing that remains the same about who you are is the fact that you’re always changing with context and time. Harper is not the same person she is in graduate school as she is when she is at home in her parents’ house. In this sense, Harper has multiple selves, shifting and changing as she moves through her life.

How does a person change and what should we make of this process of adaptation

How does a person change and what should we make of this process of adaptation? Consider, first, what it would mean to think of who we are as stable and singular, as if our identity never changed. If, from the moment of our births to the moment of our deaths, our “selves” never changed, we would never grow or become someone different as a result of life’s experiences. If you think about the events of your life, the idea of a stable, unchanging, or fixed identity starts to feel too restrictive, and, therefore, more unlikely. For example, when September 11th occurred, throwing us into a new world of threat and fear, who we were as U.S. citizens changed. Who we were as people, as family members and friends, also changed. Whether and when our country is at war affects our identities in a similar fashion. So, too, do the loss of a loved one, the effect of education, a move to another part of the country (or the world), a marriage or divorce, the birth of a child, or the gain or loss of a job; each contributes to and forever changes your identity. And, of course, each of these matters differently to different people, in different ways, and at different times: When you are holding your child, you may not be the same as you are when you are giving a speech in your communication course, even if both of these selves are, in the end, you. In this way, we talk about the self as multiple or as fragmented; the diverse conditions that circulate around who we are provide the impetus or spark for us to change. If we were static and unchanging, we would be destined to repeat the same mistakes; it is this complex, growing self that makes it possible for us to effect change in the world.

Like identity, perception is always a product of who we are in a moment and the conditions we find ourselves within; it grows and adapts, too. In this way, context—the social worlds we create and make sense of through communication—is everything. Like Harper’s identity, our identities are formed in contexts—contexts that are, as we argue here, produced through communication. For instance, imagine how mediated contexts like music videos and fashion magazines affect our choices; who we are, how we look, and what we do are informed by the various messages we encounter. In this way, any study of the social world or of the world we live in is always a study of communication: Our everyday talk, the messages we glean from the Internet and other media sources, how our bodies move through space, and so forth, all build the rules and norms that guide our actions. In this sense, our identities are socially constructed.

The term *social construction* is, on some level, self-evident: It suggests that our social reality emerges through our actions and that our world and the social rules we live by are the product of our communication, both verbal and nonverbal. Consider Harper’s interview process: the application and résumé lead to a phone interview, which leads to a formal interview, which leads to, potentially, a job offer. One might see this largely as a formal process not only guided by the company or corporation’s internal rules but also affected by state and federal laws that include

ethical and legal standards. These rules, while there for potentially good reasons (like helping discourage discrimination against someone for her/his race, gender, sexuality, ability, or religion), are nevertheless authored by people; they have changed over history to accommodate shifting times and values and are human-made rule systems. In this way, the guidelines that govern hiring processes are socially constructed.

Consider as well the particular dilemma Harper faces as a Black woman in business. She seeks to enter a corporate world that, like so many institutions in the United States (education, politics, etc.), has historically offered very limited possibilities for advancement to people who are not members of the dominant culture. The number of Black female CEOs in the United States is very small proportionately, suggesting a problem or inequity in this organizational culture. Often, this is not necessarily the “fault” of a particular business or employer but may, in fact, be part of a larger system of power. That is, business, as a socially constructed human enterprise, is subject to the same flaws we have as people. Harper, in her entrance into this human-made structure, will potentially experience all manner of problems humans might create. For instance, if the company interested in hiring Harper finds her attractive, in part, because of her racial background, they may be operating with the best of intentions. In fact, they may see the increased representation of people of color in their staff as a considerable benefit, increasing not only their internal diversity (and the perspectives that diversity might make possible), but also their external appeal and potential markets. They may also believe that directly addressing diversity is an ethically and morally just thing to do, allowing them to align their values with their staffing choices. Each of the company’s reasons and justifications is a product of social understandings, of human constructs and logics. Harper’s own fears are also a product of social construction—even a system that people create to increase diversity and provide entry for others who are qualified but often excluded may still give rise to suspicion toward those who have now been included. Consider Harper’s position:

1. People created programs like Affirmative Action and other diversity initiatives in order to correct existing inequalities stemming from our racist past and present. That is, the reason we need these programs is because, historically, individuals like Harper have been denied access to certain kinds of employment. Unfair labor practices are rooted in the past, in the distribution of wealth and power as a result of slavery and the imbalances the labor/owner relationship created. Such programs exist because, within the logic of social construction, the past generated the present and in the present, we must respond to the effects of that past.

2. So Harper gets her interview—an interview that, according to the logic of such programs, she has earned. She is qualified, a good student, a talent that would help the corporation grow in multiple ways as a result of her background, her sound educational preparation, and her strong work ethic. Her interview is predicated on the qualifications she has as a worker and student. Her racial/ethnic background is also underrepresented in the company, thus making her application still more attractive to the company. Like any other quality a worker might have (such as extracurricular activities, family name, membership in similar social circles as management, university pedigree, or achievements such as awards and internships), her profile offers something the company needs. So her interview and potential employment are based in a solid need of the company and a solid application/résumé.

3. Yet, because of a popularized backlash against Affirmative Action programs and the framing of these programs as providing “entitlements” or “special advantages” to applicants of color, Harper’s own understanding of her employment is tarnished by the self-doubt that talk about such programs (both in the media and in everyday conversation) breeds. Harper knows that there are many reasons companies hire people (including all sorts of privileges like familiarity and family

influence), but because her reasons may be centered in a discourse of unearned special advantage (and, as a result, an ignorance of how history has created the social relationships we currently live within), she understands the stakes are higher for her.

4. With all this baggage surrounding Harper's potential job, she will enter employment with an unfair burden: her strong desire to prove herself worthy as well as, potentially, a subtle form of discrimination from her coworkers who are also subject to the same discourses or cultural logics that work against her legitimacy as a worker in this office and may be suspicious of whether Harper is, in fact, qualified. In this way, racism not only works to deny free and open access to employment but also to damage those who are served by the institution's own attempts to remedy that racism. Surely, as Harper will attest, such programs are not perfect—they do all sorts of damage to her and her self-esteem—but, given the conditions that she finds herself within, what other choice does she have if she wants a fair shake? As a Black woman, she knows that trusting people's best intentions does not necessarily mean free and open access to power. Social construction helps us better understand who Harper is in this instance. She is a product of the social processes in which she is immersed, a product of the social messages she has encountered and the messages that circulate around her. Moreover, she also helps to create those very same messages. That is, she participates in those messages even as she reenacts and/or resists them. The power of social construction as a worldview is that it holds all members of a culture accountable for the communication that circulates through society.

Symbolic Interactionism

A foundational theory in communication (originally part of American pragmatist philosophy) is symbolic interactionism. **Symbolic interactionism**, devised by George Herbert Mead and so named by Herbert Blumer, theorizes that the self is a product of the messages that it has encountered over past interactions. Thus, the theory focuses on language (as a symbol system) and how language produces who are. For example, how Harper understands what it means to be a Black woman in business—that is, her professional identity—is produced through the communication that envelops her (both personally—for instance, her communication with her father and the individuals at the corporation where she interviewed—and publicly, including media communication, common cultural stories or beliefs, and so forth).

It's important to note that, because who Harper is emerges from the communication that surrounds her, Harper herself isn't the source or author of her identity. So, if she had grown up in a world without racism and a history of inequality, she might not have had the same way of perceiving her interview. If she had grown up with a different father figure, she might not have had the same work ethic. If she had not received messages that affirmed her abilities and her talents as a student, she might not have pursued the same academic and professional paths.

Symbolic interaction might make some of us a little uncomfortable. Most of us would, we venture, feel more reassured by the idea that we decide who we are and what we do; for some, it is unsettling to learn that what we once thought of as individual self-determination is really more of a collage of communication we cannot directly control. However, it may help to remember that we do play a role in this process: Each one of us speaks (or writes or performs) those messages into being, and each one of us shares responsibility for how we speak of ourselves and others. If we build what's meaningful about our worlds through our communication, then whether we speak hope or hate, possibility or punishment, inclusion or neglect matters very much.

Impression Management

Some scholars would also suggest that we can and do work to assert some control in this process. Influenced by Mead, Erving Goffman argued that people engage in **impression management**, observing that we build an impression of ourselves for ourselves and for others. This

presentation of self often involves communication choices such as what to wear, when to arrive, how and when to speak, and what to reveal and to whom. Harper, when arriving for her interview, makes choices to present herself (by wearing a suit, by reviewing information about the company, by referring to people by title, and so forth) in order to meet both her own and her interviewers' positive expectations of prospective candidates.

Like symbolic interactionism, impression management relies on cultural cues. Harper, as a prospective graduate, has encountered all sorts of messages about how to interview for jobs. From formal manuals and books to university courses to television programming, the messages about how to present a successful self for a job interview are plentiful. Harper uses those messages to meet the expectations she imagines the employers desire. This production of a self, most often, meets the norms that a given community values, ideally causing the community to speak highly of her (that she is a good student and applicant). These messages will inevitably reinforce Harper's understanding of herself as a smart and valuable business leader. In this way, we can see how perception functions: perception, as a result of the social construction of the self, is always constrained by the ideologies (those often unspoken but shared beliefs and attitudes toward something or someone) and communicative messages (how those beliefs and attitudes are shared in a culture) that surround our identities.

In either of these theories, Harper only has so much control over her identity; who she is precedes her and surrounds her in the messages she has heard and spoken about similar cultures, communities, experiences, and situations. In the end, the question of who Harper is lies in communication, in the cultures that produce messages and reinforce ideas so often that they become invisible. Exploring communication in this way, we can see the role of ideology in individuals; whether in a conversation with our friends or in the lyrics of a popular song, we learn who we are and act accordingly. However, exploring how our communication makes cultures, values, and beliefs real doesn't just remind us that our messages have consequences but also that we can change even those aspects of our selves and our worlds that seem the most natural or inevitable. In this way, we have **agency**—the conscious ability to reproduce or resist social systems (the government or military, the health care industry, the educational system, the judicial system, and so forth).

DISCUSSION

How have others constructed your identity through communication? Consider the groups to which you belong (from your family to organizations like fraternities or sororities). How are you shaped by the messages group members share? How do you shape yourself and others in your communication? In what ways do you have agency to accept and/or resist those messages?

Identity and Perception as Cultural Location

Harper's dilemma is more common than she might realize; often one of the first questions we ask when someone invites us to join some special or elite group (a club, a school, a job, etc.) is "why me?" That question is especially true for those who do not occupy what Audre Lorde (1984), a critical Black feminist poetic and cultural critic, once called the mythical norm (p. 116). For Lorde, the **mythical norm** is a metaphor for those who occupy positions of power in society; that they are "the norm" or even average or typical is a myth. For instance, in the case of ability and disability, "able-bodied" people would be the mythical norm, because culturally, collectively, we see these people as the standard. Let's consider a typical classroom: How far apart are the desks from each other? Is there room for someone who uses a wheelchair to move easily between the rows? Are there chairs (or tables or other seating or writing surface arrangements) for those who cannot fit (or cannot fit



Audre Lorde's mythical norm serves as a metaphor of privilege, locating all of us within a matrix of power dynamics, some of which may provide more or less access to power.

SOURCE: ©iStockphoto.com/ryan_christensen.

comfortably) into standard desks? How large is the door to the room? Is the classroom on the ground level or does it require access to an elevator or staircase? Is the elevator properly maintained? Are evacuation devices available for people who need mobility assistance in an emergency? Are all the building doors properly balanced and maintained so anyone can open them? How many obstacles are there between the front door of the building and the seat a student will occupy; is it easier for some students to reach that seat than it is for others? These sorts of questions reveal that, while some accommodations may be present in the room, the architects of the room designed it with nondisabled students and teachers in mind. Moreover, any deviation from the “norm” in this classroom may well represent the hard-won accommodation of a single, particular student

who had to make a special request. Lorde argues that where you fall in terms of categories of identity will place you either within or outside of dominant power relationships. The mythical norm in “mainstream” U.S. culture would be: male, White, Christian, nondisabled, young, thin/athletic, heterosexual, and upper/middle class. To what degree does Harper fit this mythical norm?

DISCUSSION

How well do you fit this mythical norm? What are the consequences of being “abnormal?” What are the consequences of being “normal?”

Positionalities

Each of Lorde's markers suggests a way of seeing yourself within social categories—each suggests a way to understand that we occupy a **cultural location** in relation to each other. Visually, you might imagine these categories as lines of a spider's web, each offering points of intersection. Harper's specific place on that web may be different than yours, suggesting that there are many different positions (and perspectives) on the web. We might talk about these points of intersection as **positionalities**. Our positionalities are where we stand in relation to various categories or elements of difference—those markers that make us different from each other, whether race, economic background, or ability. Consider Harper: She is a Black woman from a working-class background, highly educated, heterosexual, young, nondisabled, physically fit, and Christian. In some ways, she is very much part of the majority. She goes to church, she received her education from a well-known and reputable school, and others frequently compliment her for her beauty. Yet, as a Black woman from a working-class family, she has also had to struggle on uneven playing fields. Moreover, as the only Black woman in her MBA class, she often felt excluded; while no one ever said anything “racist” to her, she had the impression, especially when she first started the program, that her White teachers were eyeing her suspiciously, almost asking without words if she was serious about business. In some ways, Harper enjoyed being the rule breaker, someone who would shake up people's stereotypes, but sometimes she just wanted to be a “normal” student.

Harper is a good example for understanding how the relationship between identity and positionality can be complex: She is neither completely privileged nor she is completely marginalized. Because she has never, personally, experienced homophobia, she doesn't really have a sense of identity struggles surrounding sexuality; on the other hand, she does have a sophisticated understanding of how people's stereotypes and misunderstandings about race and gender can be harmful. Understanding your positionality helps you to understand how power and privilege are at play in a given situation. In order to understand communication's relationship to positionality, let's explore Harper a bit more fully:

- As someone who appears and identifies as Black, Harper is situated within a cultural landscape of White supremacy. That is, the United States is a country that has historically privileged Whiteness and White people. We can see this in judicial systems that, until the 1960s, made discrimination legal. We can see this in how White people have been disproportionately represented in the media; for example, most major television shows, films, and other popular culture venues feature White main characters. Where mainstream network programming does include characters of color, most often these are minor characters. We can also see this trend in government: the U.S. Senate is more than 90% White; the president, until President Obama, has always been a White male; and most governors, congressional representatives, and presidential cabinet members are White. Even the coverage of the 2008 presidential election focused disproportionately on whether Barack Obama, as a Black man, could be elected. Coverage of his presidency has often focused on the historical nature of his race and the presidency, never really separating the man from his race. This historical and political context is one that privileges Whiteness. Harper certainly feels this when her professor does a double-take upon seeing her in the MBA classroom.

- Harper is a woman and, while certainly women have made strides through the feminist movement, she still lives in a social world that privileges men. In this male-dominated world, the majority of elected political officials, CEOs, and religious figures are men. This means that, as Harper begins her career in business, she faces a very real struggle to be taken seriously. For instance, in the company where she has interviewed, most sales representatives and supervisors are men; as a woman, she will have to challenge these expectations daily.

- Harper has never really given much thought to sexuality—as a straight woman, she has never had to confront how sexuality affects her. She has never been challenged by her church, her family, or her friends as a result of being straight. In this way, she is quite privileged. If asked, Harper might wonder how her interview would have been different if she were lesbian—that is, would her prospective employer provide partner benefits? Would she need to think twice about discussing her partner, or what she did on vacation, or her views on marriage equality, worried that such details would identify or “out” her in ways that risk her employment? If Harper were gay, she might know that, at the time of her job search, in 31 states in the United States, employers could fire her for being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. But, because Harper hasn't had to confront these issues herself, she knows very little about them. That she has not needed to confront these issues is as important a factor in shaping who Harper is as her race and gender; each contributes to her understanding of herself in relation to others.

- Harper is educated. This is part of her identity; as an educated person, she has access to information many others may not possess. First, she has research skills from her experiences in college and, as a result of her MBA, has access to professional languages. She can read very complicated business reports with ease. Consider how different Harper would be (how changed her perception of the world would be) if she could not read, or if she had not attended

college, or if she had not completed the MBA. Harper’s view of the world is shaped by her educational experiences.

- Let’s consider Harper’s working-class background. While it’s possible that her new employment will alter her current financial situation, her background will inevitably play a role in how she understands money and the aspects of culture shaped by money. For instance, Harper may have learned to always use titles like “sir” and “ma’am” (instead of first names) when speaking with other adults. Her interviewers may read this gesture as a lack of confidence or assume Harper does not see herself as an equal. This is one way in which economic class assumptions may shape what counts as polite or respectful; what is polite for people from a working-class background may be very different from how the wealthy learn politeness.

We’ll leave it to you to explore all the other possible permutations of Harper’s identity, including her age, ability, and political orientation. However, we do not mean to suggest, with this analysis, that race, gender, education, faith, class, or other positionalities determine a person’s identity or worldview. (It is, as you may know from your own personal experience, very common to hold values that are contradictory to our positionalities. For example, young people are typically liberal in thought and action, but we all know young people who are conservative.) Rather, we’d argue that this kind of analysis helps you better understand how you are situated in webs of different power relationships. Moreover, when you’re part of a majority, you’ll typically have less reason or motivation to explore others’ perspectives or experiences; engaging in a systematic analysis can help you more fully understand where you may inadvertently marginalize others and how others may marginalize you.

Our positionalities, our points of view, shape our perceptions. One way of understanding identity and perception is to reflect on our cultural locations or positions crafted and situated within systems of power. For example, because she is a Black woman, Harper is culturally situated within a system of race—one that frames her experiences and affects how she sees the world, especially because individuals of various racial backgrounds experience unequal amounts of power and privilege.

Standpoint Theory

Building from Lorde’s notion of the mythical norm, we can consider another theory that can help us better understand the relationship between positionality and perception: **standpoint theory**. This theory contends that we stand in relation to one another within systems of power—that is, we are people who occupy relationships to each other and that those relations are mediated by social, political, and economic power (Hartsock, 1999). Our standpoints include our racial/ethnic background, gender, sexuality, age, ability, socioeconomic class, political orientation, geographic location, and so forth. As a feminist communication theory, standpoint theory originally examined gender, questioning and challenging women’s subservient relationship to men. Theorists who use standpoint theory not only attempt to understand unequal power relationships and why they persist but also to interrupt them. A benefit of this sort of theory is that it helps us understand how our positionalities affect our perceptions of the world, which shape and are shaped by our communication. Harper, for instance, is situated or positioned in relationship to others based on her race and gender; these markers or characteristics affect her perception. Harper does not know and can never fully know what it is like to be male or White; in this way, her perception or point of view is always partial, always limited by her relationship to power in culture. Standpoint theory, on a basic level, asks you to consider who you are in relation to others along certain lines of power.

She will, as a result of being marginalized along those two axes of power (race and gender), know more about him than he knows about her because she has to struggle to survive in a system he takes for granted.

Standpoint theory also helps us understand resistance—that is, when we think about identities in terms of standpoint theory, we’re in a better position to analyze power, to talk about how and why it has so much dominance, and to understand how similarly situated people coalesce around shared privilege and discomfort. In this sense, a standpoint can be an oppositional stance, a way of talking back to or pushing back against power. For example, this theory has helped women analyze and understand sexism as well as work together to create ways of questioning male dominance and working toward gender equality.

Researchers who use standpoint theory also argue that these oppositional standpoints are useful because those who are marginalized in power relationships are better able to see more sides of a power imbalance, even if they are not able to see all of them fully. For instance, Harper may see issues of sexism and racism with a greater degree of clarity than her White male professor, even if she cannot totally understand his perspective. She will, as a result of being marginalized along those two axes of power (race and gender), know more about him than he knows about her because she has to struggle to survive in a system he takes for granted. In another context, we might think of this as a teacher–student **dialectic**. (A dialectic, in this example, means a relationship between two opposites.) A student has every reason to understand the teacher’s interests and values and moods if s/he wants to do well in class; the teacher, because s/he is in a relative position of privilege, doesn’t have to worry in the same ways about her/his students’ interests, values, or moods. In this sense, the person who has less privilege has a more comprehensive understanding of power in the classroom because s/he needs it to survive.

One potential danger of a cultural location or positionality focus to the study of identity and perception is stereotyping. That is, we risk slipping from “your position in this system of power *influences* who you are and how you see the world” into “your position in this system of power *determines* who you are and how you see the world.” The difference between these two perspectives, between *influences* and *determines*, is significant. The first, *influences*, points out that the cultural groups you belong to (and how those groups are situated in relation to each other) can have an effect on how you think, how you communicate, and how you perceive society. This perspective leaves space (however limited) for individuality, for choice, and for agency. However, the second perspective, *determines*, assumes we can never see beyond our own positionalities. This is an **essentialist perspective**, which means it assumes people are, essentially or fundamentally, their positionalities. Someone who adopts an essentialist perspective would assume that all Black women would do what Harper chooses to do—that all Black women are, essentially, the same—without understanding that no one has the same point of view as Harper (because of all the many different aspects of her identity). These sorts of **stereotypes**—easy conclusions about people that reduce them from unique individuals to predictable types—can be both pervasive and persuasive; it is important to remember that people are individuals with the capacity for change and growth.

DISCUSSION

What is a stereotype? Have you been stereotyped? What did that experience feel like? How did it affect how you view yourself? What role do you play (or have you played) in stereotyping others?

Identity and Perception as Performance

When Harper was a little girl, she would curl up on her father’s lap and ask about his childhood. While they changed depending on his mood or the context (like if they were about to celebrate Christmas, or when their family cat had to be put to sleep), her father’s stories always centered on family, on the value of the past, and how Harper would make her ancestors proud. Harper loved hearing these stories about her potential—she was the hero in nearly all of them!—but, more importantly, she loved learning about family she’d never been able to meet. Through her father, Harper learned how her grandfather worked as a subsistence farmer, earning just enough to keep food on the table, how her grandmother worked in a laundry as the hidden labor of the White hotel owner, and how her father dropped out of high school to work in a musical instrument repair shop to support his mother. These stories

Stereotypes—easy conclusions about people that reduce them from unique individuals to predictable types—can be both pervasive and persuasive.

gathered around her, enriching her, telling her who she was and teaching her pride in her family’s past. A bedtime ritual, Harper spent many nights on her father’s lap.

Who is Harper? In this section, we answer that question by thinking about performance and identity. From a **performance** perspective, who we are is the result of our repeated, patterned human actions; in other words, as socially produced selves, our identities are always in the process of becoming. It may help to approach this explanation in pieces.

First: Who we are is the result of repeated actions. Performance studies researchers often use gender as an example of this. They would argue that even though we are born with a particular physiology—we are typically either male or female—what we have come to think of as our gender is the result of repeated, small, and seemingly insignificant performances (including how we move, how we speak, how we style our hair or wear our clothes, and so forth). Consider how men and women learn to sit properly. It’s likely that Harper’s mother or father taught her how to “sit like a lady” when she was small: Sit up straight, keep your knees together (especially when wearing a dress), lay your hands in your lap, look attentively at the person speaking at you, and so forth. She heard these messages repeated over and over again until they became second nature; even though she learned how to be “ladylike” as a child, these messages were so familiar that sitting in this way seemed “natural”—how women sit properly.

Second: These actions are patterned. Not only did Harper learn certain lessons about how to be a young woman, she learned them in concert with other little girls; that is, Harper’s learned gender patterns will be similar to what other little girls (in that same time, place, and culture) learned because the ideals that guide gender (and what is appropriate gendered behavior) are cultural. For example, when Harper went to preschool, she often played with a workbench and toolbox set. When she asked her parents for these toys for her birthday, though, she received a kitchen set, complete with miniature pots and pans. She loved this toy too. But the kitchen set reinforced how Harper, as a girl, should see her place in the home. It is important to note that the repeated actions we discussed above are not individual, but instead repeated within a pattern that is historical (from the past) and social (shared across culture/s).

Third: These are repeated patterns of human action. Here, the focus is on how we, as people, engage in repeated verbal and nonverbal communication, such as rituals. **Rituals** function to shape and define our identities. For example, Harper and her family are churchgoers, and, as such, they commonly engage in particular rituals as Christians. For instance, the ritual of Communion remakes and reinforces Harper’s faith. By consuming not only wafer and wine but also the communication messages that surround such rituals, such as prayer, Harper becomes and remains Christian, with the values and actions that identity evokes. Our identities are, at least in part, the result of routine, patterned human actions.

Fourth: We are socially produced selves. That these rituals, these repeated patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication, create us suggests that our identities aren't born with us but rather that they are built in relationship with/to other people in our lives. To return to our example of gender, philosopher Judith Butler (1990a) argues, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [. . .] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 25). Butler argues an idea here that might be a bit challenging for many of us to accept. Basically she says that we don't have identities that are the basis for our communication; instead, our (and others') communication creates our identities. Perhaps an example would help: When Harper was a child, she would go to the toy section of the large department store in her neighborhood. As she walked past the aisles, she knew which of those aisles were for her and which were for her brother. Her rows were full of pink boxes with large pink displays, ponies, make-up, dolls and doll clothes; her brother's had black and blue boxes, cars, monsters, and action figures. These aisles (purposefully arranged to sell the maximum number of toys) are not based in some biological necessity, as if Harper's playing with toy guns would make her a boy; however, building those gender-coded aisles shores up and reinforces gender categories and expectations.

Finally, our selves, our identities, are always in a process of becoming. Who we are is never fixed or static but always in motion. We build ourselves in our actions with others. While this

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might seem a little scary—if who I am isn't fixed or certain, then who am I?—it's also a very hopeful perspective; if we are continually making and remaking ourselves in communication with one another, then we are capable of change and growth (and we are never destined or fated to always be something we'd rather not be). For example, in her interview, as she talks about her qualifications, Harper is crafting her identity with her interviewers. In this conversation, Harper

becomes a possible employee, a person they can see as part of their team. If she works there, it is through the performance of doing her job, of managing her sales team, that she crafts the businesswoman she is.

Performance theorists, to summarize, take something we typically think we own or possess (our identities—as in, "I am female" or "He is American.") and show us that it is a process we participate in with others ("I do my gender, or my nationality, or . . ."). Harper learned what it meant to be a "proper little lady" from the people around her as she was growing up; she performed her gender, again and again, until that performance became second nature, something that seemed stable, inevitable, and unchanging. Now, as a young woman at a job interview, she doesn't need to remind herself of how to sit properly—she just does it, as if it is the only thing one can or should do in such situations.

A helpful way of thinking about identity is to imagine a piece of sedimentary rock. If you're just looking at a big chunk of rock, then it's easy to take it out of context and think it's just a solid, unyielding rock. But if you remember that the rock is part of something larger than itself, if you remember to see this sedimentary rock as part of its historical context, then you would see that the rock is really an impossibly large number of tiny sand crystals that, because of time and pressure, only look like a solid piece of rock. But the rock—what seemed so solid—is really sand.

Identities are made the same way. Each individual self is made up of millions of communicative messages and actions that, over time, have formed the appearance of something solid and stable. Harper may feel like her gender is something that's always been true for her, that it was as inevitable and solid as rock. Yet Harper learned how to be feminine from her earliest days as family corrected behaviors, put her in Sunday dresses, and taught her to speak properly in public. She learned how women "should" act by encountering countless messages in the media about what makes women beautiful, successful, or powerful. These messages, with



Social expectations not only help us predict what will happen, they also constrain our imaginations and limit our possibilities.

SOURCE: ©iStockphoto.com/Atriatius.

time and pressure, have become something that seems much more solid than sand. But even though who Harper is, as a woman, may seem obvious and natural, if we examine her identity more closely, her gender is an accumulation of all the communication she has experienced.

One way for us to understand how accurate this understanding of identity would be for us to imagine a situation where we are confronted with someone who does not match our expectations. Imagine Harper, who has become who she is in a cultural context where women are expected to be polite and respectful, interacting with her interviewers in an overly aggressive manner. If Harper interrupts, talks down to, and berates the interviewers, these performances would not only feel at odds with our expectations of Harper as a job applicant

but might also feel at odds with our expectations of femininity. Butler (1990b) argues: “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. [. . .] Indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p. 273). What tells you that gender (or any aspect of identity) is produced through our communication is the fact that when we do it wrong, others typically notice and correct it (often unkindly).

If Harper was too much of a “tomboy,” or if she was “too aggressive” in her interview, others would punish her accordingly (perhaps, in the first case, by asking her to behave, or in the second case, by turning her down for the job). It’s typically easiest for us to spot a communication norm or expectation when someone violates it.

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Sometimes it’s helpful for us to examine particular, individual performances (the grains of sand that create the rock), and sometimes it’s helpful for us to examine the ways those performances are patterned—the residue or what remains from repeated, particular actions (the rock itself).

Performance can, therefore, be a single act or utterance, like crossing your legs just this one time in this one situation or saying, just once, “girls are sugar and spice and everything nice.” Or, we can think of performance as the process those individual actions create, what some scholars also call **performativity**. Let’s consider the ways performance and performativity were part of Harper’s interview:

Dress. Harper made choices about what to wear during her interview. She would want to be professional, to wear appropriate clothes for the occasion, to “dress for success.” But these choices exist within a context, within cultural systems of values and expectations that change over time. Harper would most likely choose to wear clothes that others would see as gender appropriate. That is, she would probably not wear a man’s suit; instead she would probably choose a professional but feminine suit (in a size, fabric, and color the fashion industry has identified as appropriate for women) that showed she knew how to impress. Meeting others’ expectations for proper female dress is an act or performance of gender. Choosing a business suit instead of traditional African formal wear suggests Harper is working to meet others’ expectations regarding race or ethnicity; this act helps shape her race. Harper might want to dress in a newer suit, a suit that does not have flaws or stains; that she can afford such a

choice is a performance or act of economic class. These acts (as well as others we haven't discussed, like her choices regarding her jewelry, her hair, or her nails) work in concert with the assumptions we all have (and her potential employers would have) about the proper way to perform these identities within a professional business context. What might happen if Harper made different choices—such as wearing a tie? Or wearing sweatpants? Or plaiting her hair in cornrows? How would these choices affect her chances of being hired? Performativity, the patterns or rules into which our actions do or don't fit, is supported or sustained when Harper dresses as “she should.”

Vocal and Verbal Communication. Moreover, what comes out of Harper's mouth is just as important as what she wears on her body. From her vocals (e.g., her intonation, pronunciation, volume, etc.) to her language choices (e.g., when/how to use everyday slang and/or business terminology), what Harper says and how she says it are as important as anything else in an interview. What performance of self, what employee identity, does she hope to portray? How do her linguistic and paralinguistic (the tone and rate of her speech, or perhaps other nonverbal sounds, such as a sigh or a whistle, that accompany her words) choices, as individual acts, fit her own and her interviewers' expectations? Each instance helps to shore up and sustain norms, reinforcing for her and others that the norm is “how things are done.”

Gestures. Consider something as simple as a handshake. How should Harper shake hands with her interviewers? Should she use her whole hand or be more delicate and just use her fingers?

Should she use a confident and firm grip or be gentle? Should she extend her hand first or wait until someone extends his or her hand? Many of us—particularly men and people in positions of power—can move through our lives without this degree of attention to the finer points of shaking hands; however, that these questions continue to affect the choices of women in business is a fact of organizational life. Even today, women must self-monitor whether they appear “too aggressive” so as to avoid suffering the consequences. To the extent that we perform this self-monitoring without careful reflection, we participate in performativity, in underscoring “how it is” rather than considering “how it might be otherwise.”

Professionalism. Today, many colleges and universities maintain career centers to help prospective graduates prepare for the professional world. These centers offer readings and workshops on professional etiquette (from the cover letter to the interview), helping people who have not been part of corporate culture learn how to best market their skills for those who seek to hire them. Career centers are good places to observe how professionalism appears different by gender. Harper, when reading about how best to present herself, learned how long her skirt should be and how her nails should look as well as the proper height of her heels. It did not escape her notice that men did not have to wear heels. While a little bit funny for sure, the fact that such rules and norms are so concrete that people can and do write them into career preparation materials suggests how stereotypically gendered the workplace is today.



Dress and makeup work to shape the body to uphold (or challenge) social norms, producing meaning and placing us all within the power dynamics that circulate in a culture.

SOURCE: ©iStockphoto.com/emreogan.

However attractive we might find it, this modern practice of footbinding slows a woman's pace and helps her to appear delicate.

Role of Power. It is especially important to consider the role of power in relation to professionalism. Let's take the example of professional dress again: Women are typically advised to wear a shoe with a heel of "mid-level" height (about 2 inches). As we discussed earlier in Chapter 3, the question of whether to wear heels can be complicated, but for our purposes here, let's consider how men's and women's legs are differently understood in the workplace. Men's legs, concealed under their trousers, are usually hard to see—in fact, unless there is a problem, men's legs are almost never exposed in the workplace, allowing them protection against any kind of judgment about this part of their bodies. Women, on the other hand, do not typically enjoy such consistent protection. Whether or not she wears a skirt, when a woman wears heels, her legs are called to others' attention. In part, this is because high-heeled shoes are designed to create long lines and shapely curves to a woman's body such that her legs look lean, rounded, and beautiful within cultural norms for women. The fact that these shoes can do damage to the leg (for instance, the calf muscle is shortened and the foot reshaped for the worse) and that women are nonetheless required or strongly urged by professional standards to do it anyway reminds us that not only gender but also power is at play. However attractive we might find it, this modern practice of footbinding slows a woman's pace and helps her to appear delicate. Men do not have to pay this same price to look professional. It is not professional for men to draw attention to their bodies, nor is it professional for them to wear clothing or accessories that restrict their ability to move. That men are typically comfortable in business attire while women must constrain themselves in order to be acceptable helps demonstrate how power and performativity (that is, the patterns of identity) are shaped by ideology that serves the interests of those who already have power.

Performance theories of identity help us understand: (1) the way communication messages (our own and others') constitute identity; (2) the way our identities are linked to ideology and power; (3) the very complicated nature of how identity is formed and how, like the sedimentary rock, it is hard to see the multiple acts that remake us within systems of power; and, (4) that, while we have choices as communicators, our choices are always limited—we are always subject to others' expectations in order for them to understand us.

DISCUSSION

What performances do you engage in each day that work to produce your identity? Are you a gym rat? A bookworm? An activist? How can you understand these identities through the lens of performance?

Public Advocacy: Perception and Audience Analysis

* * *

The interviewers called Harper with an offer just three days after her interview. Once Harper had a chance to reflect on her choices and the events of the past month, she decided to take the job. Regardless of how she got the job, regardless of the interviewers' motives or how her new colleagues might see her, she decided that an organization makes a decision to hire a person, in the end, because she or he is whom the company needs. If they believe she is the right person, why question their intentions? She knew she would have to, again, step up and prove herself. As she

considered her future—employed, a supervisor, a sales manager—she wondered when she would stop feeling like she was being judged. But when she talked to her father later that night, she knew she was strong enough to handle it.

“Harper, you make our ancestors sing.”

* * *

Point of View

Harper’s story teaches us some important lessons for public communication, for advocating with and against others. That is, understanding identity and perception can help public speakers craft messages, designing ways of speaking that can have meaningful effects on their audiences.

First, we pause here, as we did in Chapter 2, to reinforce the importance of choosing a topic you find personally and/or professionally meaningful—such decisions are based in your perception and your sense of the others to whom you are speaking. As teachers and speakers, we typically find that the best speeches—the ones that are the most meaningful or that touch the most people—emerge from the hearts and souls of the speakers themselves. A speech on driving under the influence can be very moving; however, if you don’t feel connected to the issue or if you are choosing it because it is “easy” to do, then you are not going to do the topic justice. Look at who you are: What do you believe in, what moves you, what causes are part of your worldview, about what do you feel passionately? Examining who you are can help you decide what you want to say; further, examining who you are and what you believe will help make your speech something that has the power to change those who hear it.

Examining who you are can help you decide what you want to say; further, examining who you are and what you believe will help make your speech something that has the power to change those who hear it.

Another lesson we can take from this careful analysis of identity and perception is that we must respect our (and others’) cultural point of view when we deliver a public message. If you are part of a marginalized group

and where you’re speaking is a space where you feel safe to explore your experiences in hopes of providing a more complex and more humane way of seeing people and events, then you might consider doing so. In one of our classes, a student who lives with a rare medical condition spoke on that topic, informing the class as to what the condition does and how it affects the body. It was moving because it was real and important for her, and so real and important for us, too. Her choice was, in some ways, risky; however, the benefits of this communication for her and for the class, who did not have the same cultural/medical position, far outweighed the risks.

If there is one thing a social construction perspective provides, it is the reminder that what we generally take for granted (whether gender, race, “the way things are,” or how a college classroom looks) is not natural or “normal,” but something we make and remake over time. Things rarely just *are*; rather, things are constructed by people in ways that privilege them. Who constructed our educational experiences? Students? Teachers? Administrators? Politicians? And,

Things rarely just *are*; rather, they are constructed by people in ways that privilege them.

regardless of our own and others’ best intentions, do we all feel equally empowered in these spaces? Engaging in public speaking in a meaningful way means that when you speak about something, you owe it to the issue, the audience, and yourself to take the time to understand how your issue came to be the way it is. In other words, if I am going to speak on Affirmative Action in my speech, it’s my responsibility to understand not only the everyday ways we talk about such programs but also who

created those programs, why were they put in place, how such programs affect the people they serve, and why some folks may be against them. Treating an issue with critical, compassionate analysis is important not only for you but also for the people who hear your presentation; if you share misinformation on an issue, you affect (perhaps adversely) lives other than your own.

DISCUSSION

When you hear someone who is poorly informed speak, what does that do to her/his message and your ability to hear it?

In what ways is our credibility influenced by culture—by how we perceive others' culture and how others perceive our own?

Audience Analysis

Audience analysis is an important application of our growing understanding of identity and perception. Attempting to know your audience—who they are and how they became who they are—is vitally important for any public speaker. In any speaking occasion, the speaker must consider her/his audience: Who are you trying to move or affect, and what is the best way to do that in a way that shares your beliefs with your audience in a way they'll hear them? If you are in a classroom giving a speech to mostly college-aged students, your message will probably need to be tailored to that audience (or you may need to re-imagine your audience hypothetically as a board of directors or a group of frustrated parents, etc.). Your communication should acknowledge and respect the many different cultural backgrounds of your listeners.

Each of us engages in audience analysis all the time, often without conscious consideration. If we think about it, we intuitively make judgments about what to say and how to say it, depending on the people with whom we're communicating. And yet, for some reason, our intuition often fails us when we have to prepare a presentation for a larger, more public audience. As public speakers, we often find ourselves fretting about whether we'll speak for the correct amount of time or whether anyone will care about what we plan to say. However, if we were to spend enough time analyzing our audiences, we'd find that our topic isn't as important as helping the audience understand the relevance of that topic, its connection to our lives.

Audience analysis, done correctly, helps the speaker in every aspect of speech preparation; our impression of audience interests, needs, and concerns can mediate how we choose a topic, shape that topic organizationally, develop examples to clarify main points, grab their attention and/or leave them with something to ponder. There are several levels at which you might begin your analysis of a given audience, including demographic analysis, analysis of audience needs (motivations, values, etc.), and analysis “in the moment” (i.e., reading verbal and nonverbal cues while you are speaking).

There are certainly ways you can formally conduct an audience analysis. You can survey the audience to gain access to their demographics, values, and beliefs. For instance, audience demographics help us understand the basics of who's in our audience—i.e., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, level of education, and so forth. If you're aware of your audience's demographics, then you can develop your speech in such a way as to anticipate their needs, building upon what they already know. However, in most speaking situations, you will have, as part of your general purpose, an idea of who your audience is. In a business setting, for instance, you will have some sense of who your audience is and why you are speaking to them. The key is to understand who your audience is and communicate in a way that meets them where they are. Audience analysis is always about the perceptions and identities of those you are addressing.

When approaching communication critically and compassionately, it's clear that we each, as speakers and listeners, need to understand identity and how who we are affects how we perceive and understand each other. Because we exist in a web of cultures, we must examine and do our best to understand those cultures (and the power relationships that are embedded within culture). Whether you're speaking with a romantic partner, an audience of high schoolers, a board of industry leaders, a team of sales representatives, or a classroom of peers, the question of who we are (and how we build our perceptions of the world) cannot be underestimated.

KEY IDEAS

Agency	Performance
Cultural location	Performativity
Dialectic	Positionalities
Essentialist perspective	Ritual
Identity	Social construction
Impression management	Standpoint theory
Mythical norm	Stereotypes
Perception	Symbolic interactionism

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- Web resources

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